

A Non-Violent Worldview:  
How Gandhi and Lawson Developed the Conditions for Social Change

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Violence is part of the American way of life. It is a basic social skill that people commonly use to enforce their own will by coercing others through fear and domination. Violence is so widely accepted as an effective means of achieving goals that it goes unquestioned and unexamined. In American culture, violence connotes power and strength, while non-violence conjures images of weakness and passivity.<sup>1</sup>

Serious practitioners of non-violence, however, argue that the opposite is true: violence is an inherently fragile and unstable way of governing people. Violence is a product of hatred and fear, and its use only creates more hatred and fear. Governing through violence requires a continuous and ever-escalating use of violent methods to keep all opponents at bay. A violent perspective casts your opponent as your enemy, making them seem less than human, and unlike yourself. In contrast, non-violence requires a fortitude and strength of character that is the true wellspring of power. Non-violence is based in the belief that all people share an innate humanity, from which it follows that all people deserve to be treated with respect and love. Conflict resolution must begin by recognizing the shared humanity of all parties, and finding an approach to the problem that will benefit all sides. While a person may act in violence out of weakness or fear, non-violence requires a person to have great strength and courage in order to maintain an attitude of love and compassion even when faced with mortal threats.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the American understanding of non-violence is typically filtered through a violent understanding of the world. Violence is so pervasive in our thoughts, actions, culture and identity that effective uses of non-violence seem almost inconceivable. The few cultural stories we do tell of successful non-violent action are fragmentary and incomplete, focusing mainly on the use of non-violent tactics on the battlefield. The deep preparation, training, and soul-searching of activists who have employed those tactics, risked their lives, and suffered the consequences, is almost always ignored. In order to truly understand the power and use of non-

violent action, non-violence must be understood as a complete philosophy - a way of life that is a viable alternative to the violent worldview.

I believe that we desperately need to understand the non-violent worldview in order to dismantle pervasive structural inequalities in American society, and to continue the fight for civil rights. In this paper I will look at the philosophy of non-violence that Mohandas Gandhi developed to guide India's struggle for independence, and how James Lawson adapted and applied many of the same principles to the American civil rights movement. I will show that a deep commitment to a non-violent lifestyle was a necessary component of the success of both movements, and that non-violent methods can lead to social change that is emancipatory for all sides of a conflict.

### **Gandhi's Philosophy of Non-Violence: Swaraj Through Satyagraha**

Before Gandhi began his direct involvement in the struggle for Indian independence the movement was largely divided into two camps: moderates working with the British rulers to reform the system from within, and extremists who used acts of violence to damage and destroy the British ability to rule. Gandhi found fault with both sides. The reformers were trapped within a system stacked against them, while the terrorists could never hope to overpower the military strength of the British Empire. Gandhi offered a third way: a non-violent movement in which ordinary Indians could realize their own self-worth, and together withdraw their consent to be governed by the British.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi developed his philosophy of non-violence over a long period of time. In 1906, while living in South Africa, he began his career of non-violent resistance by leading protests against laws that discriminated against Indians and other minorities.<sup>4</sup> In 1914 he returned to India and began applying the lessons he had learned in South Africa to the Indian independence

movement. Through discussion, contemplation and – most importantly – action, Gandhi developed the two core ideas of his understanding of non-violence: *swaraj* and *satyagraha*.

One of the criticisms Gandhi leveled against both moderates and extremists in the Indian independence movement was their lack of a new vision for an independent India. What would replace British Rule? Gandhi realized that substituting British governors with Indian ones would simply replicate the injustices of the current regime. For Indians to truly achieve independence they would have to learn to govern in their own, Indian way. Gandhi saw the British way of rule as inherently violent. Governors ruled from above, forcing their laws on those below through acts of violence, perpetrated by the military and the police. Gandhi instead imagined another kind of rule: a freedom and responsibility that emerged from below, beginning with each individual Indian. He called this idea *swaraj*, using an Indian word for self-rule that connotes both the rule of India by Indians, and the need for individual Indians to achieve rule over their own lives.<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi's concept of *swaraj* was informed by his understanding of the Bhagavad Gita, an important Hindu text.<sup>6</sup> The Bhagavad Gita teaches that actions performed for the benefit of all people will lead to personal and spiritual liberation, while actions that arise out of selfishness lead away from spiritual enlightenment. Actions are not judged by their ends, but by their means. If people act in good and true ways the results can be nothing but good, but action taken in selfishness will invariably be detrimental, even if it seems beneficial in the short term.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi believed that *swaraj* must begin on an individual and personal level. By committing to unselfish action, individuals are liberated from their personal prisons of hatred and fear, and are able to realize their connection to all of humanity, and to all of creation. This relates to *ahimsa*, another concept from the Bhagavad Gita, which states that because all of humanity is inherently connected on a spiritual level, harm to one person is harm to all.<sup>8</sup>

While swaraj liberates a person, allowing them to make choices free of selfish intent, satyagraha is action taken through unselfishness, leading to change in the world. Gandhi chose the word satyagraha, which translates as “hold firmly to the truth,” in order to distance his idea of non-violence from the concept of passive resistance (which lacked the crucial concept of believing in the humanity of your opponent), and to emphasize its origin in Indian, not western, thought.<sup>9</sup>

Satyagraha describes non-violent action that, through an adherence to truth, is able to resolve conflicts in a way that benefits all parties. Gandhi understood truth to be godlike, in the sense that it cannot be fully known or understood by humans, but instead is an ideal that we must constantly strive toward. An important aspect of swaraj is the search for inner truth, and satyagraha extends inner truth out into the world, using action to expose unjust and contradictory conceptions of reality. Gandhi’s concept of truth is also the key to satyagraha’s requirement of non-violence. Humans can never know perfect truth, and are therefore fallible. If every person’s truth emerges from within, and no one can know the whole truth, how could any person be justified in punishing another? Instead, satyagraha requires its adherents to form a compassionate understanding of their opponents, in order to understand their basic humanity, and to force their opponents to recognize the humanity of those they oppose.

When satyagraha is used to take right action against a violent, unjust power, the result is often suffering – caused by a violent response against the *satyagrahi* (non-violent activist). The unjust suffering of the satyagrahi exposes the tyranny of the oppressor, inspires compassion among members of the public, and generates popular pressure for social change. A satyagrahi must have incredible inner strength to endure the suffering of the oppressor without responding with anger or hatred, and to continue to trust that their opponent has a core of humanity that can be appealed to.<sup>10</sup>

### **Lawson's Application of Non-Violence: Emancipation Through Action**

James Lawson was already on the path to developing a non-violent worldview when he entered college in 1947, but it wasn't until he met A. J. Muste, the head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, that he began to understand that non-violent action had been a force for change throughout American history.<sup>11</sup> Lawson's new understanding of himself as part of a community of practitioners of non-violence bolstered his confidence and spurred him to learn as much as he could about non-violence as a method for social change. He accepted an opportunity to travel to India in 1953, where he remained for two years working as a youth minister, and delved into Gandhian philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Inspired by the Montgomery bus boycotts, Lawson returned to college in the United States in 1956, intending to complete his education in theology. Instead, he met Martin Luther King, Jr. in early 1957, and was convinced by him to move immediately to Nashville, Tennessee, to begin developing a non-violent movement that would eventually play a lead role in the desegregation of the South.<sup>13</sup>

Lawson adopted much of Gandhi's philosophy, including the concepts of ahimsa and satyagraha, but faced the challenge of bringing these ideas to an audience in the American south.<sup>14</sup> Gandhi had steeped his teaching in Hindu references in order to connect his message to the values and religion of a majority of the Indian populace, but had also been inspired by the words of Jesus, in particular, the Sermon on the Mount. As Lawson, a Methodist, began conducting non-violence workshops in Nashville, he relied heavily on the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount to explain Gandhi's ideas in Christian terms.

Lawson made a distinction between the supernatural figure of Jesus as portrayed by the Christian church, and the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, which allowed him to understand the message of Jesus independently from the doctrine of the church.<sup>15</sup>

Matthew (5:38) records Jesus as saying, "do not resist an evil person." Lawson did not believe

that Jesus meant for his followers to passively accept abuse, but, instead, to respond to hatred with love. Matthew (5:39-40) continues, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.” Lawson saw this as a perfect illustration of satyagraha – accepting the suffering of your oppressor, and reacting in a loving way that would force them to re-evaluate their actions and motivations, in the hope that they would recognize your humanity as you have recognized theirs. Lawson discovered that Jesus taught exactly what Gandhi taught: to not react to violence with violence; to seek a human connection with your opponent; to act in love, not hatred.

By necessity, Lawson’s method of teaching non-violence had to differ from Gandhi’s. After returning to India, Gandhi quickly became a national political and spiritual figure, and was able to leverage the power of the media, as well as his own publications, to spread his message on a grand scale.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Lawson began his workshops in 1958 working with a group of only ten people. The group would soon begin to expand, but Lawson intentionally kept it small and intimate in order to foster a sense of community between the participants, and to ensure that they would each come to understand the non-violent worldview on a personal level.<sup>17</sup>

Lawson adapted his workshops from structures previously developed by other civil rights activists such as Bayard Ruston, and George Houser, as well Glenn E. Smiley, who co-lead Lawson’s workshops, and who had advised King on nonviolent protest during the Montgomery bus boycotts.<sup>18</sup> The intention of the workshops was to build a community of activists who understood and believed in the non-violent worldview. Lawson believed, as did Gandhi, that it is not enough to teach the ideas of non-violence; they must be internalized by each individual who wishes to practice them. Conversion from a violent to a non-violent worldview is not something that can be imposed; it must be discovered individually, on a deep, personal and spiritual level. Full, deep understanding of non-violence was the goal of Lawson’s workshops.

Lawson's early workshops began by teaching what he had learned from A. J. Muste: that even though non-violence has rarely been highlighted in the story of American history, it has actually been hugely influential. Lawson discussed the role of non-violence in ending slavery, in the attempt to form peaceful relations between settlers and Native Americans, in the women's suffrage movement, and in the Montgomery bus boycotts. The workshop participants began to understand that not only did historical precedents for successful American non-violent action exist, but the methods of non-violence remained available to them. Lawson was showing them the tools that they could use to end segregation in their own lives and communities.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most important tools that Lawson taught was reflection. He encouraged students to analyze ways that non-violence had been used, to see what worked and what didn't, and to try to imagine how methods and strategies could be changed to remedy the problems they discovered. Lawson connected this process of reflection and re-evaluation to Gandhi's concept of the ongoing quest for truth. Non-violence wasn't a static program to be applied identically in every situation – it was a living idea that must be shaped and formed according to the situation at hand. The non-violent method required its users to maintain constant mindfulness, creativity, and patience in order to fully understand the consequences of their actions, and the meaning behind of the actions of their opponents.<sup>20</sup>

Once the workshop participants began to understand the theory of non-violence, Lawson helped them to internalize those lessons, in order for them to develop a non-violent mindset. Lawson understood that action and experience were the keys to transforming ideas into beliefs. The workshop participants would only truly understand how non-violence worked once they began applying the lessons to real situations, thus seeing how their ideas met with reality. Lawson initiated this process by engaging his students in extensive role-playing. He led the workshop in a re-creation of the Montgomery bus boycott, from the planning stages right



through to the actions themselves. The students learned how a non-violent campaign must be carefully planned and carried out, and began to imagine themselves in roles of organizers and protesters.<sup>21</sup>

Role-playing allowed students to learn through their own experiences, and to discover the power of non-violence for themselves. Students acted out scenes in which protesters faced violent white resistance to desegregation. The students felt the sting of the insults that would later be hurled at them, and witnessed their own reactions in the moment. Lawson then reviewed the exercise with them, helping his students build the inner strength that would be necessary to endure such suffering during a real protest, and giving them practical advice on how to confront their opponents. The exercises also allowed the primarily black participants to briefly take on the role of a white racist, giving them a glimpse of their opponents from the inside.<sup>22</sup>

Lawson taught his workshops using the very non-violent methods that he was conveying. One way he expressed this was through the importance he placed on listening. After presenting an idea Lawson made sure to provide ample time for his students to engage in discussion. Throughout the conversation he would pay close attention to his students' thoughts and feelings as they wrestled with the topic. Lawson believed in the value of each human life, and the need for every person to search for and understand their own truth. He honored the value of diverse truths, and of each individual's life experience, by listening to his students as equals, and learning from what they had to offer.<sup>23</sup> As Lawson and his students began to formulate a plan for action against segregation in Nashville, he recalled a student discussion in which a woman had complained that there was no place for black women to rest and eat when they were shopping in downtown department stores. Lawson attention to and respect for that woman's experience pushed him to begin organizing a campaign to desegregate Nashville's department store lunch counters.<sup>24</sup>

In developing his students' inner understanding of non-violence, Lawson followed Gandhi's path in preparing his followers to take action. In India, Gandhi had found that one of the forces stopping a popular uprising against British rule was that Indians had internalized the British view of themselves as uncivilized, powerless, backward people. Through swaraj, Gandhi brought ordinary Indians back in touch with their own humanity and sense of self-worth, and showed them that they had power over their own lives. Even by taking symbolic action against British rule, such as wearing Indian clothing, ordinary Indians of all walks of life changed their view of themselves as a people without power to a people ready to take control of their own destiny.<sup>25</sup>

Lawson's workshops aimed to inspire a similar sense of emancipation in his students. All their lives they had lived under segregation. They had been told and shown that they were second-class citizens; their dreams and ambitions had been curtailed because of the color of their skin. Public discussions of their grievances were dangerous, and even private conversations were difficult. Lawson's workshops, however, showed them, in plain terms, the structural injustices of the system. His students learned that their oppression was unfair, that their lives were just as valuable as white lives, and that they did not deserve the suffering that they had endured.<sup>26</sup> Through the adoption of a non-violent worldview they would learn to break unjust laws, to take right action against the evil of racism, and in doing so end their complicity with the system that oppressed them. Their actions would allow them to stop thinking of themselves as victims, and to see themselves as warriors for truth, and agents of social change. For Lawson's students freedom was not found in the desegregation of a lunch counter, or the passage of federal laws, but in their very acts of resistance against an unjust system.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Necessity of Deep Preparation**

Both Gandhi and Lawson believed that deep personal preparation was necessary for non-violent action to succeed. In early 1922, Gandhi faced a crisis of faith after an independence march at Chauri Chaura turned violent. Police fired on the protesters, and the protesters, who had not internalized the lessons of non-violence, responded by overwhelming the police force and killing twenty-two officers. Gandhi immediately halted the national campaign of non-violence he had been leading. He saw Chauri Chaura as a warning of what would happen if protesters used non-violence as a tactic without adopting a non-violent worldview.<sup>28</sup> This lesson weighed heavily on Gandhi, and when he organized the Salt March in 1930 he carefully chose 80 of his best-trained satyagrahis to join him. This core group helped to teach and enforce Gandhi's non-violent methods even as thousands of untrained people spontaneously joined the march during its progression to the sea.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Lawson used his workshops to prepare his students, and traveled throughout the south teaching his methods so that others could develop workshops of their own. Lawson taught non-violence to groups preparing to resist segregation, and brought the very idea of protest, as well as news of a growing movement, to towns where resistance had yet to take hold. By spreading his message he created a network of non-violent activists who would adapt and apply Lawson's teachings to their own situations, just as Lawson had adapted Gandhi's teachings to Nashville. When the time came for mass, coordinated action, the groundwork had been laid, and anti-segregation activists were ready to strike with overwhelming, but nonviolent force.<sup>30</sup> Without this deep and broad training the sit-in movement could not have grown and spread the way it needed to, nor would the protesters have been able to maintain their non-violent stance in the face of the violent reprisals of the white population.

Though both Gandhi's and Lawson's movements achieved great success in creating social change through the use of non-violence, neither was able to replace violence as the basic mindset of their people. Gandhi was deeply disappointed that his independence movement proved unable to unite Indian Hindus and Muslims. When independence was finally achieved in 1947, the British partitioned their Indian territory into the states of India and Pakistan. War followed shortly thereafter, pitting the two new countries against each other. Gandhi blamed the partition and the war on his inability to bring swaraj to the people. He believed that Hindus and Muslims would have been able to find common ground if the Indian people had fully discovered the non-violent mindset. But independence came before swaraj was achieved, and the inner strength of the Indian people was not able to overcome the violent social structures they had been saddled with. Gandhi's assassination in 1948 deprived the movement of its leader, and India's experiment in non-violence was largely abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

The American civil rights movement succeeded in desegregating the South, as well as passing the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Still, in the late 1960s most black Americans lived in poverty, and could never dream of achieving the wealth and status of white Americans. King knew that these problems would have to be addressed if black people were ever to achieve true equality in American society.<sup>32</sup> But, fatigue in the movement caused setbacks, which the ascendant Black Power movement took advantage of. Black Power advocated separatism, not the inclusiveness that Lawson had taught. Advocates of Black Power also accepted violence among their methods, seeing non-violence as a tactic whose time had passed. Though Lawson tried to argue that a deep and broad commitment to non-violence was the only true path to emancipation, the new Black Power leaders had not found swaraj, as Lawson had, and still believed that violence could be used to achieve their goals.<sup>33</sup> The

escalation of the Vietnam War, and King's assassination in 1968, further dissipated the role of non-violence in the civil rights movement.<sup>34</sup>

In the years since King's death the civil rights movement has not been able to replicate its early success, though the oppression of minorities and the poor continues. Institutionalized racism is pervasive in American society, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of African-Americans in the prison system, and the recent publicity around white police officers killing black men in cities including Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. People are scared, frustrated and angry. Communities respond through peaceful protests, as well as spasms of anger and rioting, but neither of these methods hold the promise of reforming the institutions of American society or creating lasting change. Peaceful protest on its own does not have the power to reform the powerful structures of oppression, and violence cannot lead to freedom. Only non-violent methods are capable of emancipating both the oppressed and the oppressor, and a mindset of non-violence is a prerequisite for proper use of those methods.<sup>35</sup>

It is imperative that Americans who want to reform society and claim their civil rights must begin to teach themselves non-violent methods, and commit to a non-violent mindset. In 2013, John Dear, a Jesuit priest and non-violent peace activist, helped launch Campaign Non-Violence, which aims to re-introduce the concepts of non-violent action to activist communities, and to build a new network of activism, as Lawson did in the South.<sup>36</sup> Lawson himself will give the keynote speech at their 2015 conference. Perhaps this project and others like it will seed activist movements and troubled communities with the tools and worldview of non-violence, and help contribute to lasting social change.

## Notes

1. James Lawson, "The Theory and Practice of Nonviolence" (presentation, University of Washington Tacoma, Tacoma, WA, February 27, 2008).
2. Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 41.
3. Dalton, 18.
4. Dalton, 13.
5. Dalton, 54.
6. Dalton, 33.
7. Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1985), 54.
8. Dalton, 6.
9. Dalton, 9.
10. Dalton, 25.
11. Vincent Harding and Veterans of Hope Project, *James Morris Lawson, Jr.: The Seamless Cloth of Faith and Struggle*. (Denver, CO: Veterans of Hope Project, 2000), 10.
12. Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 15.
13. David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 16.
14. Lawson.
15. Lawson.
16. Dalton, 137.
17. Hogan, 17.
18. Hogan, 299, note 8.
19. Hogan, 20.

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20. Ibid.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Hogan, 25.
  23. Hogan, 24.
  24. Hogan, 25-26.
  25. Dalton, 193.
  26. Hogan, 84.
  27. Hogan, 99.
  28. Dalton, 48.
  29. Arafaat A. Valiani, *Militant Publics in India: Physical Culture and Violence in the Making of a Modern Polity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 90.
  30. Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 165.
  31. Dalton, 139-140.
  32. Halberstam, 531.
  33. Halberstam, 529.
  34. Lawson.
  35. Peter Ackerman, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 503.
  36. John Dear, "Franciscan-based peace group launches Campaign Nonviolence," National Catholic Reporter, September 24, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/franciscan-based-peace-group-launches-campaign-nonviolence> (accessed June 4, 2015).

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